



A Teaching for the Fast of Tammuz

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Every month comes with a bounty of lights, blessings and challenges that are its particular gift to the year. And this fourth month of Tammuz is filled with paradox, in part because of its infamous distinction as the beginning of our fall from grace. The Torah starts its counting of months with Nissan (and Pesach), for that was our birthday as a people. And so, the year begins with a surge of exhilaration, we escape 210 years of slavery and witness the most mighty and corrupt nation in the world reduced to ruin by the G-d of Israel. Then, fifty days later we experience the most powerful revelation of light and truth that has ever transpired on the planet.

And yet, despite all these eyewitness encounters with *HaShem*, we still lost our grip on faith, and sinned with the Golden Calf. This was a transgression of horrendous proportions which set in motion a downward spiral that culminates next month with Tisha B'Av, the day of inconsolable mourning for our shattered Temple and broken lives. Kabala teaches that all the failing, suffering, and darkness of our people throughout its history begins right there with the Golden Calf.

Both of these months, Tammuz and Av, were going to be times of enormous blessing. Although the Torah was *revealed* at Sinai, Moshe spent the next forty days working with *HaShem* in chavruta style relationship, to bring those lights down into *psbat*: into sentences, paragraphs and practices that would pull G-d consciousness down from the heavens into the moment by moment daily life of the Jewish people.

On the sixteenth of Tammuz we expected Moshe's return to camp, tablets in hand. We miscalculated by six hours and when he delayed we assumed the worst and imagined him dead on the mountaintop. We panicked, some more than others (the women not at all). The Egyptian multitudes that accompanied the Israelites quickly regressed to old ways, to the security of graven images, and they convinced many Israelites to follow suit. With Aharon's reluctant assistance they fashioned a Golden Calf to replace Moshe as leader and guide.

When Moshe beheld their desecration he cast the Tablets to the ground. They shattered and we lost the moment. We were six hours away from eternal paradise. If we had closed the deal, if the Tablets had entered our possession the seventeenth of Tammuz would have opened the gates to the ultimate paradigm shift. Death would have been swallowed up forever, and we would have stepped straight into the Golden Age of Mashiach and the world-to-come. That's what was scheduled for this month.

Instead it became the start of all our woes. And yet *HaShem* always plants healing tools inside our hardships. Since Tammuz is the month of our fall, it must also provide the key to its repair.

Each month brings down the energy of a particular Hebrew letter and a special talent. The Sefer Yetzira associates Tammuz with the sense of sight (ראיה) and the letter ח. These are the spiritual tools *HaShem* provides to repair the damage that occurred this month. What is their gift? How do we crack their code? Always, the place to start is with their first mention in the Torah. (TB BK 55a) Where does the letter ח first appear, and what is the first mention of sight (ראיה). In fact, both appear within the first four verses of Genesis (1:2-4).

And the earth was chaos and void, and *darkness* (חשך) was upon the face of the deep...G-d said let there be light, and there was light. God *saw* the light that it was good...

Yet, a paradox is evident. *Seeing* is something that generally requires light. It is no coincidence that its first mention in the Torah is in relation to seeing light: ("God *saw* the light that it was good"). In contrast, the first appearance of the letter, ח is in the word חשך

(darkness). And since “Everything follows after the *rosh* (i.e., the first),” the essence of the letter ח must associate with darkness. The Sefer Yetzira presents us with a riddle, and a challenge: The *tikun* for this month requires that we learn to *see* in the *dark*.

Let’s try to understand what that means based on a teaching by R. Ginsburgh concerning the prayer recited before the morning *Shema* called יוצר אור. In that prayer we thank *HaShem* for the luminaries that shower warmth, gladness, healing and light upon creation. One sentence appears both in the first paragraph of this prayer and again in the last, but with a slight change in its wording. It reads at first as follows:

ובטובו מחדש בכל יום תמיד מעשה בראשית

In His goodness He renews, in each instant, constantly, the work of creation.

This verse teaches that in each instant of time, creation reverts to chaos and is born anew *ex nihilo* by *HaShem*’s reaffirmed will for its existence. In each moment we are dissolved and reconstituted, faster than the blink of an eye. Like a movie appears continuous even though there is space between each frame, so does our existence appear continuous even though it dissolves and reconstitutes within each second.

And yet our reconstituted universe is not identical to the one that dissolved. Something has changed. Progress has occurred. In general, *kabala* explains that more of *HaShem*’s surrounding light has entered our world. The new universe, the reconstituted one, is slightly more expanded than its predecessor, which means it can hold more light. The new universe is always one step more enlightened, literally.

This fact of progress is also hinted to by the subtle shift in wording of that verse when it appears again at the end of the prayer. There it reads:

המחדש בטובו בכל יום תמיד מעשה בראשית

He renews, *in His goodness*, at each instant, constantly, the work of creation.

R. Ginsburgh explains this subtle reordering of words: At first the *good* precedes the renewal and stands, as it were, outside the process. In the second verse it has slipped inside the bounds of creation and become now an actual part of the world. The difference between the first verse and the second is that the world has stretched so that some increment of *good* that before couldn’t fit within our world, has now found the space to slip inside.

And so we have two yardsticks for measuring the progress of creation. One is that in each moment more light enters our universe, and one is that in each instant more good comes through. In fact these are really identical statements as our original verse proves.

וירא א-להים את האור כי טוב...

HaShem saw the *light*, that it was *good*.

That verse, according to *kabala*, establishes the equivalence of light and good. More light means more good; and more good means more light.

The question then becomes, experientially, what is the difference between good that is outside creation and good that is inside creation. And that’s the key to our month. For only once good has entered the bounds of our world and integrated itself into a vessel, only then does it become visible. Only then does it become subject to *ראיה*. Only then is it perceptible as good. Before that it is hidden light, which means that it is hidden good. Hidden light appears as its opposite, i.e. darkness, hidden good appears as *its* opposite, i.e. bad and suffering.

Tanya, in chapter 26, explains the implications of these ideas. It begins with the premise that G-d is good, which means that every interaction *HaShem* has with creation is necessarily an expression of good. And so, there are two categories of good:

Revealed Good, which is what we pray for, say *mazal tov* about, and wish upon our children; and

Concealed Good (or suffering), which we try to avoid, say G-d forbid about, and if it comes anyway, we say “Blessed is the True Judge”.

It is true that HaShem is pure, simple Oneness. Yet, when Divinity interacts with creation He manifests a hierarchy of attributes from above to below; from the inner, higher, essential and concealed realms to the outer, lower, superficial and revealed realms.

It follows, says Tanya that revealed good derives from the revealed levels of G-d (i.e. the outer, lower, and more superficial modes of Divine Presence). Conversely, concealed good (i.e. suffering) must then come then from G-d's inner, higher, more essential and concealed Self.

The implications of this teaching are profound. It means that in suffering one is encountering HaShem at a level of depth and intimacy that is beyond all previous experience. This revelation of light (and good) is “bigger” than anything one has ever known. The “vessel” of one’s life is too small right now to receive and perceive this new increment of good (and G-d). It must stretch beyond itself to accommodate the new light, which is forcing its way in. The process is painful. The dilation hurts. One *sees* only darkness. But in retrospect, when the work is done and the growth integrated, the event takes on a different meaning. It gets reframed, and from this new and slightly expanded perspective, it is even perceived as a blessing in disguise. When hidden good finally becomes visible as revealed good, it is called a blessing in disguise.

Depending upon the magnitude of the suffering, this process can take days, years, and even lifetimes. Yet we *will* eventually grow into our suffering, and on that day, whether in this life or another, whether in this world or the next, every cell in our body, will thank HaShem for the wondrous and precious gifts that were the underside of our pain.

Though weather-beaten and battle-weary, there are newfound treasures in our grasp. One has deepened, wisened, and actualized potential. One has entered a new level of relationship with G-d. Some aspect of Divinity, previously beyond one’s grasp, is now consciously accessible. *Concealed good* (i.e. suffering and its pangs of growth) has become *revealed good* (i.e. the peace and quiet joy that accompanies actualized potential and expanded relationship with G-d). The pain slowly eases, while the treasure of light remains as a permanent resource in one’s life (and in one’s soul).

This is how we learn to see in the dark. Through our stumbling and our suffering HaShem trains us to see the good that hides in the ordeals and dark pits of our life. He sensitizes our palate (or perhaps I should say retina) to even minute concentrations of hidden good. It is easy to see God in the dramatic fire of Sinai, but it is a whole other level of maturity to see Hashem in the darkness. It is possible that the sin of the Golden Calf was a heavenly set-up, for exactly this purpose, so that its repair would force us to develop the priceless capacity to see in the dark. (Tsidkat HaTsadik 154).

I want to bless us as individuals and as a community that we absorb the lessons of our lives into our heart, bones, cells and spaces, both the lessons that come through study and those that come through ordeal. And with all this newly acquired light, let us learn to see in the dark, so that even the slightest sliver of good (*tov*) becomes visible to our heart/mind and gives us the strength to rise and shine and turn darkness into light.